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AVENUES OF LANGUAGE-EXPRESSION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL¹

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In considering the place of language in the school, the fact presents itself at the outset that there is no significance in language apart from the function which it serves; that there is, in truth, no such thing as language by itself. For language has grown out of the instinctive desire for expression which is so great a part of the social self, and out of the evolving needs of man which could be met alone through communication. Wherever conditions of social intercourse exist language must inevitably develop. It is a pervasive element of human life, running out from every part of our thought and feeling and activity.

It is with the aim of perfecting this natural growth that provision is made in the school for language-study; but the limitation of this provision to a few lines of subject-matter and to certain periods in the day is made with a view to the restrictions imposed on the public school by its size, not in relation to the true function of language or to its natural process of growth. Such restriction is, perhaps, necessary; but these special "avenues" which we are forced to select serve their purpose only so far as they grant the same reason for language in school as in the world at large; that is, a desire in the individual to communicate some part of his own interests or to share those of others. The term "expression" sometimes seems to imply the mere putting forth of thought, but it is impossible to conceive of any natural expression whose very reason for being does not involve relations with others.

The primary period is the time of all times for language-development. During these years the social and other objective

¹ Paper read before The Elementary Department of the National Educational Association.

interests which express themselves largely through language are at their height; the time of reflective thinking, when independent effort increases and outward expression becomes less necessary, has not yet dawned; nor have the reserve and shyness of the later years of childhood developed. This is the time when children love to talk. They come into the distinctive inheritance of the race in the most direct way possible, by plunging into the use of language as soon and as fast as the need for it is felt.

The two factors in this acquisition are the hearing of speech and the child's own speech utterance. The two work together, the utterance objectifying the auditory images, testing them over and over, and so developing and co-ordinating the speech organism. All through this period the ear is the organ of sense-appeal. It is the organ through which the feelings are most stimulated—and this is the time when feeling is the dominant force—and the only means by which direct contact with language is reached.

On this basis an earnest appeal is made for *oral* expression in the primary school. The interpretation of symbols through the eye is a later development, and the writing of these symbols adds to the complication. Reading and writing have their beginnings in the primary school, but they depend upon a free and continuing use of oral language, and are only an outgrowth of it, and a small outgrowth, all through this time when the foundation itself is forming. It is not unusual, however, for much of the "language work" even in the second and third grades to be written. Aside from the reversal of the natural order in this, the nervous strain is very great in the effort for mechanical accuracy before either muscular growth or general co-ordination is equal to the task.

As to the content of what is expressed, if we believe that language has educative significance only so far as it helps to carry on phases of the life of those who use it, the question is answered. Then any interest or activity native to the child of the primary school is a natural avenue for language-expression. So far as we allow the children to increase our knowledge of what these inherent interests are, we have an increasing basis of choice.

First of all is the absorption in the objective working out of life—play, and the constant doing of things. From this clue the hand-work and co-operative construction in the school have grown. And in all this language is the natural accompaniment. Making the playhouse or the garden, modeling a village or weaving a basket, demands interchange of ideas, the explanation of plans and means, and the social intercourse in itself so essential at this age. Nor is the language in connection with all this merely haphazard. The direction given, however, arises from the demands of the activity itself. For example, success in results is found to depend upon saying exactly what is meant; an increased vocabulary is needed; and interpretation of plans and directions and records becomes necessary.

This same kind of activity, although without so much organization, fills the child's life out of school, and it is only fair that he be given in school an opportunity to talk and hear about what is of the greatest possible importance to him.

The story must always be a source of inspiration for the child's growth in language, if alone for the reasons that it is an inherent demand of the little child and that it allows him to hear the language spoken. For the need of hearing a very great deal of speech can hardly be overemphasized. That the language he hears be of the best and beautifully spoken is most essential, since his ear will never again be so susceptible to nice differences of pronunciation and enunciation.

Because a child loves to hear a story over and over, it does not always follow that he is ready to retell it himself. Part of his enjoyment lies in the story-teller's mastery of the language and in the sound of the words, and largely through the simple and beautiful language of literature that first vague sense of beauty and delight in artistic expression is to begin. When the thought has been so absorbed that the child has a desire to express it again to others, and when he has sufficient language-control to do this with satisfaction to himself—that is, without self-consciousness—the retold story is not mere reproduction, but becomes something given by the child himself.

The aims of the literature in the primary school are often

largely defeated by demand for constant reproduction, especially by the great amount of written reproduction in the upper primary grades. We have all seen classes, after reading or listening to a fine story, and proving by their discussion an appreciation of its essential meaning, turn listlessly to the writing of it. There would seem to be more reason, and so more inspiration, in the simple compositions which have their origin in what the children themselves are doing, as has been suggested, and in certain phases of the nature-study.

Since the elementary science deals with relations whose acquaintance the child makes for himself, it is inseparable from language; for language is a most convenient and available tool for probing into the facts of the real world about which children are so curious. There is one tendency in the treatment of the nature-study, however, which detracts from its value as a means of language-development; that is, dealing with the various nature elements in terms of human experience and human relations until those terms become merely conventional symbols.

The primitive poetry in giving human feeling and purpose to the wind, streams, storms, etc., is fundamental in the race, and often appears in the child's own interpretation of nature; and certainly the little child understands the nature-processes by analogy to his own life. But to continue the phraseology of the beginning nature-study too long seems highly artificial. Nor is the imagination of the child appealed to by the mere giving of unreal names to familiar objects. His fancy rather enables him to conceive of unseen forces as realities, and to compass great stretches of time. In a way, he is better able than are we to grasp the story of the great building process that began the earth and made the rocks or the soil. Such subject-matter, dealing with the very processes of life itself, has peculiar fascination for children, and the language through which it is thought out must, from the nature of the thought-content, be charged with vitality and fullness of meaning.

Although there is a universal theory that language-training below the high school should come principally through the work and the life of the school as a whole, a large part of the time

assigned to English is still devoted to the study of grammar. That the reward of much of our grammar-study is so slight is largely due to the fact that our English grammar still rests on a Latin conception. The inflections have largely disappeared from English, and still many grammars continue to regard them as an important element. When the time comes for the study of the relations between words, sentences, etc., we should be able to presuppose a considerable power of abstraction in the pupils. Much of the grammar prepared for the grades nevertheless goes beyond the power of students below the high school. That the study of the science does not assure ability to use language is shown by the meagerness of language, both spoken and written, of students who have been brought up on grammar, but who have not been accustomed to express themselves freely or to hear good, efficient English. The premature study of structure, moreover, given before experience with realities has been sufficient to develop interest in structure, prejudices pupils against a study which should have value later. This does not imply a disparagement of grammar-study. I only mean to say in this connection that my observation in the intermediate and grammar grades has not made clear the relation between a knowledge of the technique of language and a full, free development of power to use the language.

There is, to be sure, more need of form-study in the upper grades, since the increasing field of thought brings greater need of understanding the possibilities of language for expressing finer differences of meaning. But this knowledge of structure can come only through considering the word or sentence in the closest possible relation to the thought it conveys. If the child could once understand that he studies the relations between words because he can, thereby, make them a more efficient medium for his own use, not because there is a system of relations inherent in the words themselves, the feeling of remoteness, of unreality, about this technical study would surely be lessened.

In the upper grades literature and art have a still larger place in bringing in both the thought of the great world and models of perfect expression; and often the poem or picture, when it has served this purpose, is made the basis for testing some bit of the

technical knowledge just referred to. For several reasons, this is an unfortunate use of a work of art. There is a great dash to the feelings in dropping suddenly from the inspiration of something beautiful to a survey of the outer form of that beauty. To make a list of nouns from a stirring poem not only perverts the purpose of the poem, but brings a disfavor upon the nouns which they do not deserve. For interest in them can come only through learning of their use, and this is to be discovered in the very act of their service, not in disembodied lists.

When pupils come to a conscious scrutiny of language, the cultivation of a feeling for the word that gives just the shade of meaning or the full force of an action, learning to appreciate the greater strength in directness, the habit of clear imaging, recall of parts read which have made special appeal—all this goes with the discussion of acts and motives and the use of personal experience in interpretation. Of all this, the habit of imaging is most important in the development of language through literature. This means, of course, not merely visualizing, but includes all the unconscious motor expression so characteristic of children.

At this time, when verbal memory is at its height—that is, in the intermediate grades—the beginning of a permanent literary store may well be made, but there is a dissipation of energy in “learning by heart” anything that does not come within the true meaning of that phrase. If we could reduce the number of fragments committed to memory, choosing instead a smaller number of entire poems, we should, perhaps, be surer that they would last as a permanent source of pleasure. A small girl of my acquaintance innocently alluded to the “memory jams” she had been learning, little appreciating the fineness of her phrase.

If we were to sum up our perplexity over the written work, would it not be that the results show perfunctory effort? There are, of course, always special cases where genuine interest is unmistakable; but, on the whole, it is clear that the aim of the written work is to make the use of correct form habitual. When we attempt to explain the lack of spontaneity back of the written pages, we are again confronted by the futility of pursuing language-culture through the composition as a means in itself. This is made plain by the fact that when the child recognizes a

genuine reason for his writing, it becomes a genuine effort on his part. This does not exclude the observance of correct form, but makes it a subordinate part of the aim. So long as there is a real interest in the writing from the child's point of view, the subject is a minor matter. But writing for the sake of writing, on the theory that "practice makes perfect," precludes the motive which alone gives language value. There must be some outcome beyond the page written; for example, the letter that is really mailed to someone with whom the writer has a personal relation of some kind, not merely an artificial, literary relation.

Individuality develops rapidly during the grammar-grade period. New interests are springing up continually. The subject assigned to an entire class appeals less and less, which adds to the problem of selecting subject-matter that shall meet with a genuine response. This suggests in part the solution of the difficulty; namely, that we reduce the amount of written work. In support of this is the fact that pupils at this age are naturally conservative. Free, easy expression is no longer characteristic. And while the self-consciousness and the shyness and awkwardness of expression are quite apparent, the increase of mental activity and of assimilation are not always so clearly recognized. It is a time of absorption and storing up, and all that is assimilated will appear sooner or later in increase of individual strength.

Summing this up, the communication of the native interests, worked out through all the activities of the elementary school, is the natural basis of the language, and the educative value of language-training rests on a recognition of the fact that the thought-content and the interest in communicating or receiving that content alone give meaning to language. The primary aim in the language of the elementary school is the development of power to say freely what is pressing forward for expression in the child's mind. The aim in the study of structure is that language may become a more efficient means for this expression. And the basis of all language-growth is oral expression.

This is but saying that language is not merely a system of symbols which the child is to regard as already organized outside of his own life, but that it is a part of his own mind and heart which is to grow as he grows.